

Learning lessons from Concordia

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In September 2002, a violent protest at Concordia University forced the cancellation of a planned speech by Benjamin Netanyahu, then a private citizen and former prime minister of Israel. A short time later, as the first Israeli to speak after that riot, I was escorted by a phalanx of security officers to a Concordia classroom to give a lecture on Middle East political developments. By this time and for many years later, the Montreal campus had become synonymous with hatred and intolerance targeting Israel and Israelis.

It was, therefore, with a sense of vindication that I returned to Concordia recently to participate in the annual conference of the Association of Israel Studies, organized by the Azrieli Institute, headed by Prof. Csaba Nikolenyi. For three full days, some 300 academics held dozens of seminars on a wide range of topics related to Israel, including politics, art, cinema and education. In the evening, in one of the larger auditoriums, the participants gathered to honour and listened to an address by Prof. Irwin Cotler, MP and former justice minister, on anti-Zionism as anti-Semitism. During the conference, there were no disruptions and no protests – after almost 13 years, Concordia was no longer enemy territory.

In the context of political warfare, fought through anti-Israel boycotts and demonization, characterized by bullying and sometimes violent intimidation, the battle for Concordia is an important precedent. The counterattack was neither simple nor immediate, nor was it guided primarily by anger or emotion. Students, faculty, and community members in Montreal needed to work together, over a number of years, developing allies and an appropriate strategy. Sufficient resources were necessary to establish a long-term and visible presence, and the Azrieli family, among others, generously provided them.

Leadership and determination in the face of intimidation and bullying are also necessary in these struggles. Not every battle involving demonization and boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) needs to be joined, but a general policy of avoidance and compromise, particularly over the big issues, is a guarantee of defeat. The efforts to prevent Israeli musicians from performing, to boycott Israeli films, to close sports leagues such as in soccer to Israeli clubs, or to undermine core organizations such as the Jewish National Fund require strategic counterattacks against the perpetrators of this form of “soft power warfare.”

Not every battle can be won, but when victories are achieved, they serve as a deterrent against those who might otherwise embrace BDS, and help to demoralize the other side. By visibly and unabashedly restoring the Israeli presence at Concordia, the outcome of the previous round, from

10 years ago, has been reversed. From this perspective, the resources invested in the campaign to demonize and exclude Israel changed nothing, in the long term

Furthermore, the return of Israel and Israelis to Concordia reflected co-operation between adherents to different ideological and political positions – left, middle and right. Differences over foreign and domestic policy – over relations with the Palestinians, on strategies regarding BDS, on Israel's housing crisis, and other topics – were debated without rancour, as is appropriate for an academic setting. In contrast, one of the biggest weaknesses in the fight to defeat BDS and demonization is the internal warfare and narrow agendas that prevent co-operation.

Concordia was one of the first battlefields in the war to “completely isolate Israel as an apartheid state,” as declared at the infamous 2001 NGO Forum of the UN anti-racism conference in Durban, South Africa, but it will not be the last. There are at least 15 university campuses across Canada where BDS bullying and intimidation is active. In the United States, there are dozens more, and in much of Europe (particularly Britain), demonization of Israel is routine. And in parallel, the virus is spreading to the corporate realm, as firms are being bullied by threatened lawsuits designed primarily as a means of harassment. In all of these cases, the lessons of Concordia need to be learned.

